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Odds stacked against wards of the court

Lawrence P. Adams , Midland Daily News

Imagine you've been in foster care most or all of your life. Among all the other disappointments you've had to deal with, you've had no parents, you have been moved time and time again and few adult mentors were available to teach you what you need to know in order to live successfully on your own -- like how to manage money, where to find a job and why you must never, ever give up.

Michael wants to "make it" -- but the odds were stacked against the 18-year-old man.

The reason: he spent his formative years as a ward of the state, bouncing among more than a half-dozen foster homes.

"When you grow up like I did, you can't wait until you turn 18 and can get out of the system," said Michael, who was in foster care since age seven. "I thought I would just pack my bags and walk out and have my own life."

Each move a child experiences is another loss-of friends, school, and surroundings -- and another rejection for the child. Without consistent moral guidance, without a positive self-image, and with no cause for hope, the child becomes a fertile soil for failure and hopelessness.

Nearly 75% of children experience more than one family foster home placement during their time in out of home care system

One out of every ten children in the current foster care system can expect foster care to be permanent care, given that they will spend more than seven years in the foster care system

Being raised by the state can be a ticket to a lifetime of struggle and failure for foster children, according to a new study by the Harvard Medical School and Casey Family Programs. Researchers found young adults are often released from foster care without important life skills -- many are alone and adrift after foster care with little or no support from state caregivers.

The picture grows even bleaker as teens age and leave foster care - as all must, ready or not - at age eighteen.

Each year more than 20-25,000 youth reach their eighteenth birthday and age out of the foster care system. This means an end to ongoing support and guidance of caring adults -NFPA (National Foster Parent Association)

Nationwide, nearly a quarter go homeless within the first year and one-third live below the poverty level. Former foster children also receive public assistance at a rate more than five times higher than that of the general population, and fewer than 2 percent earn college degrees.

Michael was among the unprepared when he was emancipated shortly after turning 18. He did not have a high school diploma and very few low paying job prospects. With no family -- he didn't have anyone to turn to for help.

"You just feel so stupid and so alone," he said.

Each year, hundreds of young Michigan residents, like Michael, are released from the state's care after their 18th birthdays.

Michael struggled with the transition from state care, "where they tell you when to eat, when to pee and when to go to bed."

Such problems are common among former foster children, according to the Harvard-Casey study. Although 80 percent of the former foster children surveyed said they felt loved by their substitute caregivers, the study found just 20 percent were "doing well" on their own. The majority face significant challenges:

- Instability caused by numerous moves
- Emotional or mental problems not addressed
- Lack of a proper education due to constant moves
- Lack of a support network to help them succeed
- Homelessness
- Joblessness
- Unwanted pregnancy
- Drug and/or alcohol addiction
- Crime and incarceration
- Death

My friends, this is the "Road to Hopelessness."

Russell W. Massinga, president and CEO of Casey Family Programs, said the findings should be a wake-up call.

"Children enter the child welfare system because of traumatic family circumstances and through no fault of their own," he said. "We have a responsibility to provide them with good, permanent homes to help them repair the hurt and succeed in life."

"When it comes time to take them out of the system, they don't have the skills they need. Many of them end up right back in the system. It becomes a vicious cycle."

The best they can hope for is that somebody they've had a relationship with -- in the community or the child welfare system -- will provide some assistance that will help them pull out of several years of despair.

"I think most people underestimate the struggle these kids face and their need for support, it's almost like we are giving them an impossible task."

Personal support is vital!

I know what Michael and others like him will face aging out of the system. I was in foster care from birth to 18.

I am a product of the foster care system. I was placed in it at birth and was moved fourteen times by age eleven. I had no behavioral problems or other special needs; however, I was never adopted and aged out of the system.

I was one of the fortunate ones. I may be an adult now, but I have fought every inch of the way to be where I am. I had to go without food, sleep on an unheated porch, be sexually assaulted and live through many other things that are not important now ... I made it.

I had few advocates in latter years in the system that used to tell me; "They cared about me, I was worth something and that I must always remember that." You have no idea how many times I had to keep repeating that to myself in mind and heart when I finally heard it until I believed it.

WHAT CHILDREN NEED:

According to most childcare experts, children need four things:

- 1) Connectedness; "children need to feel that someone is there for them and they are a part of someone's life"
- 2) Continuity; a sense of continuous belonging with another person
- 3) Dignity; all children are worthy of respect caring, love, thought, and courtesy
- 4) Opportunity; children need an opportunity to grow and develop- need to be able to explore and express their capabilities- access to quality education, recreation, and leisure appropriate to their developmental levels

The best way to achieve all the above is a permanent, stable family rather than years of languishing within the system moving from one temporary home to another!

They need someone to adopt them and treat them as their own son or daughter long before they face aging out of the system and possible destruction of their lives!

November is National Adoption Awareness Month. Though the need for adoptions is year around, special emphasis is placed on the crisis need during this particular month.

In Michigan approximately 4,500 children reside in foster care eligible for adoption.

From data I have been able to gather from across the country; the number waiting across the country is approximately 123,000 children.

Today there continues to be a constant flow of children aging out of the system who are not as fortunate as I was. Children are very fragile. They want to be loved so badly that they will do whatever they are told just to cope. Inside they are dying. They are not able to form who they really are. How could they?

As we commemorate another "National Adoption Awareness Month," I ask you to consider becoming an adoptive parent or parents. The rewards will be numerous. You do not need to be rich to adopt, you do not need to be married. Character, love and stability are the most precious commodities you have to offer a child.

Help a child in need, give them a home, love, nurturing. Though some will be difficult due to special needs or problems that developed during their stay within the system...you can watch them grow and mature into productive, law-abiding citizens you will be proud to call your son or daughter.

They need you! Only you can offer them the tools needed young in life for them to be all they can possibly be.

A foster child is waiting for you!

I implore anyone who believes in children having the right of a caring, loving, and nurturing home and "real" parents to join me in this fight... Please consider adopting a child in need of a forever family!

All it takes is one person to make a difference in their lives, somebody they can turn to in the critical points.

If interested please contact your local Department of Human Services office or a private agency in your area.

Will you be that one person or couple?

Lawrence P. Adams is a former Michigan foster child and author of the books "Lost Son? A Bastard Child's Journey of Hope, Search, Discovery and Healing" and "A Voice from the Voiceless and Forgotten." He serves as an Advocacy Ambassador for International Advocates for Children. He may be reached at larry@larrya.us or by visiting his web site at www.larrya.us. He lives in Midland.

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